Visual Literature in the 21st Century: An Interview with Anna Gerber

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Anna Gerber.

Emerging in the midst of an ever-changing technological landscape, the London- based publishing house *Visual Editions* has quickly established its position as a center of creative exploration and production of "visually interesting stories." Sustaining a focused approach for the works it commissions and publishes, its rapid development reflects and is reflected on its visual innovations, which radically transform the landscape of contemporary literature.[1]

Visual Editions was launched in 2010 by Anna Gerber and Britt Iversen, and their kick-starter project was the re-imagining of a literary classic, Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman.* What followed was an outburst of creative energy, moving from the re-invigoration of literary classics to highly experimental literary texts which foreground the visual aspect of a narrative and the materiality of the print book as a cultural object. Jonathan

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Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes* (2010), Marc Saporta's *Composition No*1 (2011), Adam Thirlwell's *Kapow* (2012), and the inventive *Where You Are* (2013) are but a few of their published works. Through the exploration of the visual labyrinths of literary textuality, these cultural products in essence constitute an innovative approach that dismantles the pervasive elegies about the future of the print book.

Visual Editions does not concentrate exclusively on print publications, but also seeks to explore the potential for digital reading experiences. In this direction, they collaborated with Google Creative Labs and launched Editions At Play, producing books that can be read on a mobile phone device. Under this scheme, they have published eight books including Reif Larsen's *Entrances and Exits* (2016), a narrative that blends Google Street View and fictional narrative, resulting in an enriched locative experience, and the recent one *Breathe* (2018) by Kate Pullinger, an experimental ghost narrative that uses the features of the reader's real-life environment in order to tailor the fictional story into a haunting experience; the outcome of the process is , according to *VE*, "a ghost story shaped by your phone's data." The innovative storytelling experiences that the Editions At Play scheme features, resulted in *Visual Editions*' being awarded The Peabody-Facebook Futures of Media Award, for Excellence in Digital Storytelling: Mobile in 2017.

Some of *VE*'s other endeavors involve a collaboration with The British Library into exploring ways that digital books can be archived for future readers, signaling an understanding of the possibilities as well as the challenges involved in the creation, storage, and access to digital narratives. Another interesting series is Bedtime Stories with Ace Hotel Group, a project that features the recording of bedtime stories by authors in Los Angeles and London, producing narratives that span across continents.

VE do not regard their work as a wide-ranging manifesto on the future of the print book or the future of print publishing in the era of digitality; on the contrary, their work seeks to explore the potential of narrative production across media. More precisely, the focused publications of *Visual Editions* aim at surfacing and realizing the inherent potential in several literary texts for a visually engaging design, which significantly enhances the reading experience while retaining a delicate balance between the forces of the visual and the verbal. These forces work neither supplementary nor competitively to each other; rather, they constitute integral parts of the narrative and reflect *VE*'s ideological core which involves bringing together literary authors, graphic designers and photographers in the conceptualization and production of 21st century cultural products.

A significant part in the innovation of *Visual Editions* rests in its adherence to certain theoretical approaches in literary textuality but, perhaps more importantly, in its divergence from them. Certainly, the writings of W.J.T. Mitchell, Katherine Hayles, and Jessica Pressman, among others, constitute a conceptual space within which the work of *VE* could be placed or located; along similar lines, the works of publishing houses such as *McSweeney's* and *Four Corners Books* can be

regarded as a source of inspiration and direction. The publication of literary texts such as Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), Steve Tomasula's *Vas: an Opera in Flatland* (2002), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), and Reif Larsen's *Selected Works of T.S. Spivet* (2009) suggest a space for a literary production which foregrounds visuality and the materiality of the print book. The association of *VE* to these literary texts, publishing houses, and literary theories can be viewed as one of creative and malleable reference; in other words, as a starting point for the exploration of the visual element in literature, albeit resisting to be contained in theoretical norms and conventions and fueled by a fervent desire to move 'beyond.' In this respect, placing *VE* within a particular theoretical or ideological framework does not entail anchoring it but liberating it instead; it signals its adherence to literary history and the history of print publishing but, in essence, only to mark its departure from them towards unchartered areas centered on the possibilities for the narrative of the print book yet to be addressed and realized.

1. You produce "great looking stories." What is visuality for you?

I think the idea of visuality in strong relation to that of moving beyond the boundaries between the visual and the text. I think one starting point is this idea of working down a hierarchy between the visual on the one hand, and the assumption that the text exists as something higher or more important, or more valuable than the visual. So, the objective is to break that hierarchy down, and to look at the role of visual and text alongside one another, and to publish books that only exhibit this kind of relation.

2. Do you consider Visual Editions as part of a larger trend in contemporary literature?

Yes and no. I think on the one hand, there is a rich literary heritage for this kind of approach, which is one of the reasons why we published *Tristram Shandy* as our first book, because that is the first exploration into this kind of writing. On the other hand, I think with more on a focus on digital, there is also more of a focus and more of a human need for cultural objects, so we think of our books as also being cultural objects that live in people's homes, and these cultural objects have more of an attention to design and craft and textuality, which you could translate into having a more visual impact as well.

3. Which other publishing houses would you have yourselves comparable to? I am thinking of *Tangible Editions, Mc-Sweeney's...*

Yeah, we always talk about *McSweeney*'s as being one of our early inspirations, absolutely, for its irreverent approach for going against the grain, for also publishing books as objects, but this spirit, I think, was much more potent ten years ago when they started than it is now.

4. So, what is it that distinguishes *Visual Editions* from earlier attempts to approach literature in a non-conventional manner?

I think one of the big differences is that we don't see ourselves as publishing artists' books or limited editions, so I think that the tendency to give as much attention and as much of a spotlight on the craftedness or the books as objects as we do, also has meant traditionally that from a publication point of view, that this is done in small numbers. But actually, one of our ambitions from the beginning has been to have a broad reach, and to reach as many people as possible; which translates – in production and design terms, and in ambition terms – as publishing mostly paperbacks, thus keeping our prices down. If there is a demand for a book, then we respond to that demand. So, for example, *Tree of Codes* has sold over 30,000 copies which, for a book that is so intricately produced, is quite unusual. It would be a lot easier to have just made a hundred copies of that book and sold it at a really high price, but that wasn't our intention.

5. So, you try to combine the mechanics of production but without compromising the content or the visual aspect of your works.

Exactly.

6. Do you view your work as one of instilling a visual aspect on a verbal narrative, or do you think that all narratives have such a potential, which though remains largely unexplored or unrealized and needs to be brought to the surface?

No, I definitely don't think that every book has a potential for a visual narrative. I think our publishing and commissioning approach is very focused and looks at working with writers who are interested in exploring these different ways, working in collaboration with designers rather than in isolation, or with classic texts that have the potential for some visual discovery as well. But I think it's important to say that this isn't a call for the future of literature, by any means, nor is it a call for the future of publishing; I think it is one possibility for the future of the book, which is what we are excited to explore, but it's definitely not a one-size-fits-all approach.

7. When a great deal of attention is paid on the visual aspect of a literary work, do you think you run the risk of *Visual Editions* or the works you publish becoming too self-conscious or self-referential?

Yes, absolutely, I completely agree, which is why (and that goes back to my earlier answer, it's not one-size-fits-all,) I think what's paramount is for the text to be read and enjoyed and for the visual to not get in the way of, or burden, or distract the reader. It's a conversation we have with every single one of our projects, whether the visual is enhancing the reading experience or is it getting in the way of, and if it is in any way getting in the way of, then we have to pull back. So, it's about finding a balance between the two and, ultimately, with the view of the book being read, that's why we are doing this.

8. What are the effects of foregrounding visuality on the reading experience?

I think it's important for that experience to be a reading experience, and that reading experience could come in different shapes and sizes; it can be a playful experience, it can be a poetic experience, it can be a tactile experience. There are a lot of different phases that one can go with that experience, and that's what we are really interested and pushing, and pioneering, hopefully. The visual experience or the reading experience can move beyond the object as well, so we've also explored digital experiences, for example with our fifth book, *Where You Are;* it exists as a box of maps, which is incredibly tactile and very intricate, where there are sixteen different maps that fold out in different ways and, alongside that, we published simultaneously on the same publication day a website that has the content of the entire book online, open access, which was, some would say could have been a really risky thing to do, but it actually encouraged people to read the same content in different ways. So there is a digital potential as well, and a physical, even-based potential. We hosted events at the Viennae around our third book called "a mass live reading event" and this explored shuffling people, so we had 150 volunteers come, and we called them "reader outlouders" and each volunteer had a page from the book and audience members, visitors to the museum were invited to go to, or find, or happen upon different reader outlouders and hear the book read to them in different ways. So I guess what I am trying to say is that these are all different possibilities for reading experiences, and we see them all on the same level, whether we are dealing with/that's a book as an object or a live public event or a digital experience.

9. Working in collaboration with authors, graphic designers, and photographers must be challenging and rewarding. However, have you had to compromise any part of the verbal narrative for the visual part or effect, or vice versa?

I wouldn't say that we had to compromise. I think a lot of times Britt and I see ourselves working as conductors do, so we tell one part of the orchestra to go a little bit louder, and another part of the orchestra needs to be a little bit quieter at different points in the process. Like we talked about earlier, our conducting is very much about finding that balance between the visual and the text, and finding as faithful an entry point into the story as we can in any given project, and that means absolutely working very closely with writers, with designers, with photographers, as in our last book, and finding a place where each voice is heard without competing. So it's about hearing those voices coming together at the right time.

10. How does what you do in *Visual Editions* alter, or provide a fresh dynamic regarding the role of the author and the publisher?

I don't think that the way we work is any different to most publishers in relation to, or with respect to their relation to the author. Perhaps what's different is that we encourage a relationship between the author and the designers. Typically, what happens is that an author works in isolation, then works with the publisher, and the designer is brought in at the 99th hour usually to design a cover, whereas here the designer is brought in as early in the process as possible to help shape the writing sometimes, as in the case of Adam Thirlwell's *Kapow!;* and other times to help shape the story or help shape the experience of the text in a different way as in the case of *Where You Are*. I think that's probably unusual, it's a difficult thing to scale as well, because every book that we work on has a team designed around it, which for us as publishers it's really difficult, if not impossible, so in fact we try to mix and make those relationships possible.

11. You have started a series of projects entitled "Writers in Residence." Can you introduce them to us?

The philosopher Alain de Botton originated the series called Writers in Residence. We approached Alain to write one of the maps for the *Where You Are* collection, and he wrote back to us a delightful email that said "of course I would love to give you a map, but I have a much bigger project that I thought to talk to you about" and that was the seed of him approaching us with the Writers in Residence idea The idea is a really ambitious one, which is to marry literary giants like Jeoff Dyer or Douglas Coupland together with magnum photographers, and send them almost on mission or adventure to institutions or organizations that otherwise are closed to the public. So they go to the places like the United Nations, the IMF, and come back less with reportage or less with any kind of critique even, and more with stories, and anecdotes, and experiences, and relatable incidences that give us a different insight into these places that dominate our modern world. Because of the topicality of the subject matter, and because of the role of photography, we thought it would be exciting to explore the series as

you would do a new magazine, so the design approach is meant to collapse the boundary between book and magazine. As a result, the format is larger than our typical format, and has a belly band, which is meant to be a kind of a visual nod to magazines. We also commissioned Jeremy Leslie, who is one of the most knowledgeable people about magazines in the world and also a fantastic designer, to design the whole series of Writers in Residence and it was also a way to give more space to the photography, so again looking at/treating/approaching photography on the same plain as the text. The first book in the series was by Jeoff Dyer which is called *Another Great Day at Sea,* and Jeoff went on board the largest aircraft carrier in the world and writes a really funny reverence of the tale of his time there. The second book is by Liaquat Ahamed who is a world-renowned financial writer, and he went to visit three different sites for the IMF, it's called *Money and Tough Love*, and the third book which will be out in September is by Douglas Coupland called *Kitten Clone*, and Coupland visits Alcatel, which is the largest global center for the Internet, so in some ways *Kitten Clone* becomes a non-fiction version of Coupland's earlier works like *Microserfs* or *jPod*, a typical very insightful pop-culture drive through a company that nobody has ever heard of, but actually runs most of our lives.

12. In one of your publications, *Another Great Day at Sea*, the world of the verbal is combined with the world of the visual through the incorporation of photographs as integral part of the narrative. How do you perceive this interaction?

Rather than making any kind of large statements on literature and photography, (which many people would do far better than me,) I think that photography works as an essay in the way that the lighting does exactly, as in your words, photography becomes integral to the inherent relationship between content and medium. It's interesting though because the book also has an American edition which was published by *Random House*, and which doesn't have as many photographs, treating photography in a very different way, and we've had some people write to us saying that they liked the American edition better because the text is uninterrupted or they liked our edition better because it offers a different experience, so it might be worth looking at the differences in the reading experiences and the readers' overall reception of the text.

13. One of your recent book projects involves the re-imagining of a classic work of fiction, Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. Can you tell us more about it?

We commissioned a photographer to spend two weeks in Spain. We had a kick-start campaign, which was something we had never tried before, it was fantastic in terms of galvanizing an audience, so we had a captive audience for the book, which feels very exciting and a playful and engaging approach for us, so we plan on including everyone's names in support of the kick-start campaign as part of

the book to bring the audience into an editorial approach of the book. The idea to introduce photography into *Don Quixote* was to bring out different elements that make the book culturally relevant again. This photographer traced Don Quixote's journeys throughout La Mancha, so it's faithful to the text but it also introduces a contemporary approach because of photography; a lot of the old editions of the book have illustrations that accompany the text, and here we are introducing a different visual component, because the photographs are taken in Spain today. In this respect, there should be a nice interplay between the Spain of the time that Cervantes wrote *Don Quixote* and Spain today. So, we are not shying away from modern visual elements in the photographs, such as neon signs for instance; there is a fantastic photograph of windmills made up of neon signs, which encapsulates the approach I think really well.

14. Is the re-invigoration of classic or historically significant literary works a direction or path that you intend to follow?

We've always said that we wanted, or our intention has always been to publish nearly commissioned writing as well as re-imagining innovative classics, such as *Tristram Shandy* and *Don Quixote. Composition no1* was also a re-imagining, the difference with that was that it was a classic very few people knew about, and the reason we published that was because it was the first ever book in a box.

15. Do you view the works you produce as books or artifacts? Or is what you do an assertion that the two are not mutually exclusive?

I think it would depend on how you would define artifacts. We think of our books as being cultural objects, but those cultural objects live on people's sofas and in people's beds and in the bottom of people's messy bags and on tubes and on trains rather than behind glass cabinets or specially designed bookcases that nobody uses or sees.

16. Do you view digitality and media convergence as a framework or environment within which *Visual Editions* functions, or as starting point for the creative exploration of the print book as a medium?

It's an interesting question, I think I would say that we function as part of it, but I think it's as human beings that we function as part of it, we always talk about how there is a digital world on the one side and a physical world on the other side, but actually these polarities are really blurred, and I think as human beings we need both. We absolutely function in a digital world, and we also function in a very physical, tactile world so there is a huge number of people I know, myself included, who write on paper post-it notes and then actually stick those notes on my phone or my laptop, which a simple metaphor of exactly that, and I think

in *Visual Editions* we absolutely see ourselves as living in both worlds, depending on what the book or the project, or the author or the designer needs. And importantly, what the audience needs as well, the audience is part of that axis as well.

17.
Do technological innovations determine the course of digital publishing or open a widening of possibilities for a literary work?

Absolutely; but technical innovations also do. It's interesting, because the need of response to technical innovation is something that only lives digitally but actually technical innovation is what made a book like *Tree of Codes* possible. Because the die-cuts on every page were actually made possible through technical innovation, so there is much more of a blending together of both worlds than people like to think.

18.
Do you have any long-term objectives for *Visual Editions*? How do you envisage *Visual Editions* in ten years?

I have no idea! Of course we have long-term objectives, and our big ambition, which sounds ridiculous most of the time, is to celebrate the book's future, and in doing so, to re-invent the book, hopefully. Whether that's what is happening in ten years' time, I really have no idea. Ask me again in ten years!